

God's Infinite Imagination

Worship at Trinity Lutheran Church, Perkasie, PA

by Jennifer L. Phelps

When the world seems full of uncertainty and fear, when a pandemic shuts the doors of our church buildings, when the people of God are seemingly cut off from the means of grace in the worship practices that have shaped them for lives of faith as they have for generations before, the people of God grasp for promise, presence, and hope. To whom shall we turn? How shall we hear the word of God? How will God be revealed in the means of grace in the midst of our broken community? These are not new questions for the people of God who have been shaped and reshaped by worldly crises for generations. In times of wandering and exile, God's people continually reform and adapt as God's presence and promise are revealed in new and surprising ways.

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, an ELCA congregation in the suburbs of Philadelphia, followed a journey of intentional discernment with regard to online worship and Holy Communion in the months following the cessation of in-person worship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An imperfect assembly of the body of Christ in need of the gift of grace, we rested in the infinite imagination of God to meet us in our struggle and to reveal the means by which we are assured of God's presence and promise.

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By God's grace and mercy, Jesus Christ is with us, both within and beyond our actions, historical rites, and contemporary practices. We rest in the assurance that God is living and active, reaching out to us in faith, love, and hope, and perhaps in ways that we may not have yet come to know. Through Scripture, we come to know that God will

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not abandon us. God will appear as promised, even in ways that defy the religious authorities' well-reasoned expectations. The gospel accounts are full of stories where Jesus did just that!

During the pandemic's disruption of our well-worn gatherings for worship, we rest on the ever-present and imaginative God we know in Jesus Christ. Perhaps this disruption will shake us out of complacency and reawaken us to God's grace and presence. Resting in the gift of faith, we can pray with Paul as he did with the Ephesians:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:18–20; NRSV)

But, in these days, comprehending that breadth, length, height, and depth is difficult. Is it possible for God to utilize new means to gather together the body of Christ? Is it possible to adapt ingrained worship practices as the world around us shifts and changes? Will the word be proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered in practices that



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are not uniform throughout the church?¹ Might we form the assembly in a new way using twenty-first-century technology? Yes. With humility and courage, the people of Trinity Lutheran trust that God, indeed, gathers us to be the body of Christ even as we seek new ways to worship.

What follows is both an account and reflection of our process. Perhaps it will reflect similar experiences or conversations in your context. Perhaps not. More important than the decisions themselves, though, are the ways in which an entire community—not just its leaders—assess the foundational principles and tangible practices of its worship in a particular time and place. In the second chapter of Revelation, John of Patmos declares four times: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; NRSV). At Trinity, the pandemic has helped us to see and hear our community in new, sometimes surprising ways. We are listening as best we can with that breadth, length, height, and depth. This is a story of what we have heard and how we have responded.

Context: Faithful and Broken before the Pandemic

As with any Lutheran congregation, worship at Trinity before the pandemic was far from perfect, even as we strove to be faithful to our theology, traditions, and community. We are gathered together by God to be the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit moves in us, sparking and shaping faith, worship, and service. I begin with the following description and confession on behalf of the community, knowing that our worship gatherings were never perfect in execution or completely safe for all members of the body of Christ. To begin here is to rest in the ongoing grace and mercy of God who is present with us beyond our abilities and brokenness in every assembly at worship, pandemic or not.

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church is formed by 128 years of faithful worship and ministry in a suburban community 30 miles north of Philadelphia. Before the pandemic, Trinity celebrated Holy

Communion every Sunday at two nearly identical morning worship services that used the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* family of resources. Over time, staff and worship leaders have exercised a lively process of ongoing worship renewal, balancing the comfort of familiar practices with the discomfort of renewed practices without judging the value or faithfulness of the worship of previous generations.

When we consider our pre-pandemic worship practices, we must confess our brokenness and the imperfections those practices embodied. Likewise, worship during this pandemic will continue to embody that brokenness. We worship faithfully while knowing that we fall short of the glory of God. Whether our worship is elegant or faltering, the triune God is there in and among us.

We confess that we are a nearly all-white worshipping community in an area of increasing diversity. Our Sunday worship times preclude the participation of those who work weekend shifts, nor had we made provisions for the immunocompromised to join us. We have our fair share of saints who give terse and judgmental glances to wriggling children or to siblings in Christ whose unexpected and uncontrolled utterances due to disability or confusion cause disruption. When a few are moved to dance or proclaim praise in exuberant ways, others make known their displeasure and discomfort. Our worship leaders are not always poised and elegant. For reasons unknown, the sound system does not always comply with our plans or expectations. Our building is not easily accessed by those with physical limitations. Members of the assembly check electronic devices during worship and chat socially at seemingly inopportune times. Some selfishly utter comments of dislike about particular hymns, the number of stanzas sung, the length of service, and even the worship leaders' footwear. We break the unity of the Holy Communion meal for

the sake of hospitality to those who are vulnerable in our community: we break one loaf of wheat bread and also offer separate allergen-free wafers; we use pouring chalices to fill small individual cups while also making pre-filled grape juice cups available for those who cannot drink wine.

And still, the people of God have been drawn by the Holy Spirit into God's presence to hear the word, share the eucharistic meal, and be sent out into ministry. Generations of families have assembled around word and sacrament in this unique body of Christ. Compassion and service flow outward from worship in lively and meaningful ways into the surrounding community. We are known as the congregation who generously supports the local food pantry. We brave difficult conversations and practice ways of listening to differing viewpoints and seeing the belovedness of people who differ from ourselves. We are broken and redeemed, all at the same time because of God's compassion, mercy, and grace shown to us in Christ. God accomplishes in us far more than we can see or imagine. Thanks be to God!

Crisis: Frameworks for Response

At Trinity, we responded quickly as the pandemic began to affect our community. Between March 9 and 13, we introduced increasingly restrictive guidelines for ministry, among them creating safe practices for serving food; encouraging physical distancing at our midweek Lenten gathering; then suspending in-person gatherings and closing the church building. That first Sunday, we chose to livestream worship on Facebook; the director of music and I shared a few hymns, read Scripture, preached the already-prepared sermon, and prayed together with the community alongside the real-time comments and conversation that Facebook livestreaming allows. We didn't try to replicate our regular Sunday worship in an empty sanctuary. We wore no vestments and stayed seated for the entire broadcast. That was what we could do quickly in order to stay connected, offer comfort, and proclaim grace in a moment of great anxiety.



After that first Sunday, we discerned how we would move forward as a worshipping community that could not gather in person. There was uncertainty about everything. Would this last for just a few weeks? Would we be able to gather for Holy Week? How would we continue to follow God's call to faithfully proclaim and experience Christ's presence and grace in this time of anxiety and worry? We intentionally decided to discern each subsequent step rather than attempt to plan for every contingency in the midst of so much uncertainty.

That week, we learned to more fully utilize the technology resources at hand. Monday through Friday, we gathered on Facebook Live for morning prayer, Scripture, and reflection. In-person Bible studies were moved to Zoom video and telephone conferencing. On Wednesday evenings, we livestreamed our regular Lenten evening prayer. On Sunday mornings, we livestreamed a service of the word in the sanctuary with pastor, musician, and two volunteer technology assistants.

Through these platforms, we quickly realized that we could be in conversation, hear the questions and concerns of the community, and continue to comfort one another with gospel words of grace, mercy, and hope. The "live" platforms allowed for conversation and interaction with prayers—more so than our usual in-person gatherings when prayer requests were usually met with silence. We were surprised at the seemingly paradoxical intimacy

The production team sets up to record a worship service at Trinity Lutheran Church, Perkasi, PA.



created by our community in such a public platform. We also realized how many were left out of these conversations because of issues related to access, familiarity, or reservations about social media and privacy.

We came to understand that the pandemic magnified the struggles, uncertainties, and anxieties already present in the congregation and community. We struggled with aspects of technology and accessibility, of how to keep the body of Christ together as the worldly situation continued to grow more divisive, partisan, and dire. Ultimately, we wondered: how would God gather, feed us with the word, strengthen us by means of grace, and send us for the sake of this pandemic-stricken world? Did God intend for us to fast in this time of deep need? Could God find a way to spark faith through twenty-first-century technology? The last question we could answer with certainty, for God continued to act as assemblies adopted technological advances—printed hymn books, electricity, and computers—throughout the ages.

Seeking to be faithful to God's call to proclaim Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and knowing that God always works through our human limitations, we stepped forward with humility and courage to continue offering online worship while addressing its challenges. We began a conversation about worship in the midst of pandemic knowing full well that we would continue in our imperfection. We would step forward trusting God's presence while wrestling with our sinful realities. We assured our community that with each new step, we were listening and discerning.

Initially, we postponed making decisions about Holy Communion, realizing that decisions about the sacrament were fraught with challenges and struggles. We studied, listened to denominational leadership, and listened to one another. We watched on social media as debates about communion devolved into an either-or dichotomy full of vitriol and shaming. While desiring to stay connected to the larger church and listening to the wisdom offered, our congregation took seriously the words of Timothy Wengert who, in a March essay on the

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topic, wrote that "there is no one right answer to this problem." Furthermore, Wengert described pastoral wisdom offered by Frankly Drews Fry in such matters: "Give it your 'reverent, best guess!'" Wengert advised study, prayer, and humility: make a best (albeit imperfect) guess about how to move forward while remaining open to new wisdom arising from these rapidly changing circumstances.²

Such humility reminds us that we do not hold God's means of grace in human control even as we seek to protect those means from misuse. We recognize that our theological wrangling reflects our own shortcomings, fears, and pressures. Wengert noted that the sixteenth-century reformers saw two dangers in sacramental practices: either make the sacrament into something effective by virtue of humanity or focus on mere performance without faith.³ Many scholars and church leaders seemed content to pause until a satisfactory response could answer the question, "Why do you want to do this?" Instead, Trinity reframed the question: "Why not?" Recognizing both the limitations of our gatherings and God's infinite imagination beyond our understandings, we moved forward in our discernment, ultimately coming to understand that our "reverent best guess" meant celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion as a community, gathering together over technology in a way we never did before.

Ordo: Reflections about Worship Online

What follows are more specific descriptions of the thought processes, challenges, and decisions

that accompanied the congregation's transition to weekly worship online. The discussion borrows the four-part structure—the *ordo* (“order”)—of weekly Holy Communion as outlined in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (pp. 92–93).

The Holy Spirit Calls Us Together as the People of God

The people of Trinity did not hesitate to gather for worship online—to sing, pray, and hear God's word. Though we mourned the loss of our familiar physical gathering, the community embodied care and compassion for our most vulnerable by complying with advice and directives issued by medical, scientific, and governmental agencies. Our community lived in a tension between the yearning to gather and the desire to keep ourselves and others safe from sickness and death. The draw of the Holy Spirit to be together in whatever way we could was evident.

The congregation already had a Facebook page with followers, a robust email distribution list, a mediocre website, and an Instagram presence led by the young people in our community. We had also relied on in-person announcements, print resources, and word of mouth to share news and updates. Our congregational communication systems were varied and always ineffective to a degree. In the moment of crisis, we quickly moved to email and social media communications, using a “phone tree” network to fill in the gaps.

In the early weeks of online worship, we contacted every member of the congregation to inquire about internet connectivity and social media use. We found that about 15% of our member households were not connected to the internet, an impediment to gathering online regardless of platform. In response, we purchased a telephone conference line that allowed non-internet households to listen to worship. With both internet and telephone connections, we knew that all of our community members could, at their choosing, listen to the worship service as it occurred. And yet, we were aware of other technological limitations.

Those who accessed worship online who were not members of Facebook could not comment and share prayer requests during services. And though the telephone conference line allowed callers to interact, we muted participants in favor of a broadcast that was free of static or other background noise.

We chose to livestream on Facebook because we believed that platform was best for social interaction. During the first week, we noticed that participants readily introduced themselves in comments, shared greetings with one another, and offered prayer requests to the whole community. Though easier to play pre-recorded videos on Zoom, we did not have the capability to record video at that time, nor were we in a position to invest in more advanced broadcast software.

After a few weeks, we began to notice comments and prayer requests from people we did not know. With encouragement to the community to post greetings at the beginning of service including their location, we realized that our assembly now crossed state borders. Extended family members of our pre-pandemic worshipping community joined us each week. Others shared worship through Facebook “watch parties” that provided access for still more people beyond those who had already “followed” the church's page. Members of our worshipping community who had moved away and had yet to find another congregation joined us again with relief and joy.

In our online weekly worship, we are no longer confined by geography, space, or time—paradoxically gathering as a new kind of assembly while still grieving the joy of the incarnational, in-person gathering. We can neither turn our backs on the blessings nor ignore the brokenness of this new reality. Moreover, we realize that our understanding of gathering is shifting in ways for which we cannot yet see an ending. Currently, we are making plans to restore in-person worship (per appropriate guidelines) while continuing our online presence by installing technology (inconspicuously) in the worship space and imagining creative ways to connect the in-person and online assemblies.



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God Speaks to Us in Scripture Reading, Preaching, and Song

Perhaps the easiest part of our physical-to-digital transition concerned the reading of Scripture, preaching, and sharing of songs. Our pre-pandemic practices have largely remained intact, albeit without the physical presence of the assembly. The lectionary texts are read, the sermon is proclaimed, and we sing hymns together. Each week, a worship bulletin is emailed to the community and posted on our website. For those joining by telephone, hymns and readings are verbally introduced twice. Hymnals have been delivered to those who do not have internet access, as well as to anyone who requested one.

The hymns and songs are accompanied by our musician as they would be for an in-person assembly. We choose to not amplify a solo singing voice on our livestream in order to encourage singing at home; we believe that a solo voice may encourage consumption of music rather than facilitate participation. And yet there have been requests for that solo voice. As a pastor with musical training, I am often asked to sing all the hymns, even as I read Scripture, pray, and preach. My voice simply would not endure for the entire service. In response to such requests, we added an additional microphone near the cantor so as to include a singing voice during hymns, especially those led from the organ. We are blessed to have the gifts of a sound technician who is able to maintain balance between the spoken voice and music in our space as we livestreamed while simultaneously using the sound system, a Mevo camera made specifically for livestreaming, lavalier cordless microphones for speech clarity, and microphones for organ and piano music. An iPad is used to manage the Mevo application, controlling the camera as well as transmitting sound to the telephone line via a THAT-2 interface.

Preaching a sermon to an empty room is not easy. I have little sense of how the proclamation is being received without the subtle cues offered by body language and eye contact. However, I have found other means for facilitating conversation in these times, extending the proclamation of the word beyond a single worship event. Our online schedule provides sustained opportunity for the community to dwell in the lectionary texts multiple times per week. For example, for the week of Sunday, June 28 (Lectionary 8A):

- on Monday, I hosted a Facebook Live conversation about the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah;
- on Tuesday, I hosted a “children’s chat” on the themes of the gospel reading;
- on Wednesday, I participated in Bible study on the lectionary texts led by a retired pastor who is a member of our congregation; and
- on Thursday, our director of music hosted a “music chat” about hymns based on Romans 6.

The lectionary texts are now open before us in more ways each week than they were before the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, worship leaders at Trinity invited the assembly to add their voices to the prayers during worship. At best, a few brave voices spoke a word or a name into the silence; many feared speaking over another or sensed that their words would be inadequate. Yet, from the outset of our online worship, the assembly began naming prayer petitions through our digital platforms. We later discovered that members of the assembly had reached out to others based on these online prayer requests. Our digital and interactive worship has fostered a greater sense of community support through the prayers of the people; in fact, this is the element of online worship that members fear losing most once we resume in-person gatherings.

God Feeds Us with the Presence of Jesus Christ

For at least a decade before the pandemic, the people of Trinity celebrated Holy Communion at all Sunday worship services. Initially, we abstained from the meal when we moved to online worship. But as Holy Week approached, the yearning for the meal became more pronounced. Worship leaders grappled with questions and concerns raised by bishops, liturgical scholars, and others. Faithful and deep conversations about the sacrament followed—both formally in council meetings and informally through Zoom and telephone calls.

As pastor, I listened deeply to the underlying theological commitments about this means of grace. The commitments were varied, influenced by upbringings in a variety of denominations, pieties that focused on the personal forgiveness of sins, and a sense of connecting to the presence of Christ through familiar means of bread and wine. Many understood our “virtual” gathering as a “real” gathering, just as they understood digital connections with family and friends as being in the presence of family. Could that not be the same with church family around the meal of Holy Communion? Like the question of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:37), we asked: “What was to prevent us from receiving God’s means of grace in Holy Communion during an online gathering?” Trusting that God’s imagination and presence extends beyond our history and our limitations, we decided that our next “best reverent guess” was to celebrate Holy Communion on

Easter Sunday. We also committed to continuing this conversation after Easter, listening carefully before making further decisions about celebrating the sacrament online with regularity.

We struggled with our understanding of the presiding minister’s role at the meal. If the community’s faith had been shaped by weekly sacrament, why would they now be called upon to fast from it if the pastor is present with them online? We did not consider “at-home” communion kits or sending bread and wine out from the livestreamed service; though novel, our online practice affirmed that the pastor was still there, still presiding.

Accordingly, members of the assembly were instructed to gather bread and wine on their own, with the reassurance that Christ’s presence was full in one element. Not wanting individuals to compromise themselves (through, for instance, potential exposure to the virus at a store while procuring sacramental elements), we encouraged households to gather whatever they could. We also refrained from distributing bread, wine, or prepackaged communion kits for fear of possible contamination or virus transmission. Though we prioritized safety before unity, we were surprised at how many members of the community shared pictures of their sacramental meal from their home: bread and glasses full of wine set out reverently in a way that indicated that they created a sacred space for the meal.

The liturgy of the meal proceeded much as it did every Sunday before the pandemic. We gave thanks, proclaimed the good news of the meal, prayed the Lord’s Prayer, and encouraged the community to serve bread and wine to one another with the usual words of promise. Knowing that the thanksgiving at the table and the words of institution would feel distant or disembodied through electronic means, our community was invited to choose a person in the household to speak these words along with the pastor. While imperfect and awkward at times, it offered a way to embody the proclamation of God’s grace through the sacrament in the home.

Reflecting on this experience after Easter, it was clear that community members were strengthened



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CONTEXTS: TIME, LITURGY, RITUAL



The community is engaged with one another in new and surprising ways—ways we could not have imagined just a few months before.

by the sacrament. They indicated a sense of connection to the community through the meal. They asked when it would happen again! Mindful of the need for further reflection, we decided that we would celebrate Holy Communion once per month during the pandemic in our online worship. This meant, too, that some of the community's children communed for the first time while in their homes. Since then, parents expressed joy about celebrating the sacrament with their children as a family at home, and we have planned for age-appropriate instruction about the sacrament for those children when we can resume gathering.

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God Blesses Us and Sends Us in Mission to the World

Our online services conclude with an invitation to share in the ministry to which God calls us in this time. Although offerings are not gathered during worship, we verbally acknowledge the community's generosity and acts of service. Compared to the same period in 2019, congregational giving has increased, and we frequently receive gifts from those who have never physically set foot inside our worship space. There is a profound sense of connection and ministry; this flows out of the community for the sake of the world even as the church building remains empty. The community is engaged with one another in new and surprising ways—ways we could not have imagined just a few months before.

Although there is a place for lamenting the loss of physical gatherings and many reasons to preserve or protect established sacramental practice, we at Trinity are open to God's renewing presence in ways we have not yet imagined. Given the history of God's people, should we be surprised that the people of God experience God's presence in new ways as the world changes? By no means! We have found new ways of being in relationship with one another. We know that God continues to be living and active in our lives. We see that participation in online prayer and Scripture reflections continues to be strong; more people now participate in Bible study through Zoom than did in person before the pandemic. God is here!

Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches

And yes, we hear the yearning for worship as a physically gathered assembly. Do we wonder if we sound like the Israelites pining for the fruit of Egypt after being freed from slavery—blind to the gift of a new way because it is different than what was before? We hear the anxiety of those who fear that too many will become accustomed to the convenience of online worship. However, has not God been acting upon the hearts of self-centered human



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beings for generations? Might God find new means to connect and deepen a sense of faith, increasing the desire to connect to the Christian community in new ways? Might we be finding ways to proclaim grace beyond our doors for the sake of the world in ways that break open our sometimes-insular worship practices? Does God intend that the church withhold the means of grace in times of crisis? Or will God’s infinite imagination call us forward? What is the Spirit saying to the churches?

Our online worship experience has been one of discernment, and our “reverent best guesses” ultimately rest on the promises of Christ’s mercy. Our world is changing in ways we have yet to imagine, and we are not naïve enough to falsely hope that things will simply “go back to normal” once the pandemic clears. Rather, we acknowledge that our worship practices before the pandemic were far from ideal, always in need of renewal within a community resistant to change, and always a means by which God gives faith, grace, and life. There will be other worldly crises and pandemics. We will continue to grow in our technological prowess. By faith, we rely on the reality that God will continue to be present with the means of grace to meet and transform us by Christ in whatever circumstances may come.

At the time of this writing, the congregation is planning for a hybrid form of worship that embraces both in-person and livestreamed elements. We take seriously the call to care for the body of Christ, including those who are most vulnerable to this disease. Although we do not have all of the answers, we trust that God’s infinite imagination and love will carry us beyond where we have been in the past. We are listening and continuing with our “reverent best guesses” into a new way forward. Our prayer—for our community and for the church—is this:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.⁴



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Notes

1. Augsburg Confession, Article VII, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.
2. Timothy J. Wengert, “Holy Communion under Quarantine” (March 16, 2020), <https://www.elca-ses.org/files/documents/%26+brochures/news+and+announcements/the+lord%27s+supper+and+the+corona+virus.pdf>.
3. Timothy J. Wengert, “Luther and the Deadly Plague,” *Lutheran Quarterly* (Holy Week, 2020), <http://www.lutheranquarterly.com/online-features>.
4. *ELW* Morning Prayer, p. 304.